

Careful planning will make harvesting and preserving food a year-long process

By Dynah Geissal

What harvesting means to you will largely be determined by whether or not you have electricity. When I lived on my farm in the valley, I had power, and just about everything went into the freezer. Oh, I still canned fruits, pickles, tomato sauce, and such, but I had for the most part switched to freezing as my primary method of preservation. We butchered all the larger meat animals such as pigs, calves, and goats as soon as it was cold and/or whenever I had to start feeding hay. Only the breeders were overwintered.

Now, because I live on a mountain with no electricity, I have returned to canning. We also dry tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, and berries on trays on the warming shelf of our cookstove. The lives of the smaller animals and some plants are extended to preserve "food on the hoof," so to speak. While we do maintain two freezers in town, the inconvenience of having our food over an hour away leads us to keep as much as we can here. I prefer to go out to the rabbit pen to butcher dinner, even though that may mean the litter is kept longer than optimal, rather than store them in the freezer.

Obtaining and preserving our food supply is as integral a part of our lives as maintaining our water system and our heat source.

Make a plan

Whatever method of preservation you choose, harvest planning is a year-round occupation. I suggest keeping a notebook or some such and writing in it what you expect to do during each month as you plan the harvest of your food. For exam-

ple: May 1—Buy weaner pigs; November 21—Expected butcher date for hogs. Of course, as time goes by, things change. These dates are not written in stone, but are merely a method of organizing an overall plan. For everything you plan to eat, write down dates of planting, breeding, butchering, preserving, or whatever. These tentative plans will help you to see your overall food design.

Year-round chickens

I start raising chicks in January so that I have live ones for most of the year. It's not easy without electricity, but it can be done. I heat bricks to keep them warm for the first couple of weeks, and their box is as near to the heat stove as it can safely be. The top of the box is covered with plastic so that they have light but also are kept warm. At night, I cover that with blankets and sleeping bags. If it's very cold, I get up during the night to replace the bricks with warm ones. When it's safe for them to move outside, they go into a refrigerator box inside the chicken house. Boy, do I miss my old brooder house. We hope to build our real barn this

summer, and then we will have a more permanent setup for the chicks, as well as all the other animals.

I get new chicks every couple of months through September in order to have some for sale and some for eating. After September, I get a break from chicks. It isn't really practical to raise them in the fall. They don't grow well during the short, cold days, and they take way too long to reach butcher size. Slack times in the bird business means cleaning the chicken house and butchering and freezing the remaining cockerels.



Eggs from kerosene

During my first winter without electricity, I had just about decided that it made no sense to keep more than a few hens. The nights were so long and cold that I hardly got any eggs for three months. This year, however, I decided to try using a kerosene lamp. I hung a barn-style lantern from a hook attached to a crossbeam. It is out of reach of the chickens and provides plenty of light for our small shed. The amount of kerosene I used each night was determined by how much supplemental light I needed at that time to give a minimum of 14 hours. During the longest nights, I used a cup of kerosene. I wasn't sure at first if the use of kerosene would be cost-effective, but it turned out to be a great success. We had eggs all winter, and except for the molting period, we always had some to sell. We buy kerosene in bulk for about \$1.75 a gallon, which is a real bargain for all the eggs we get.

Our temporary chicken house is sided with one-by's and has a metal roof. It's not tight and it's not insulated, so I think the hens did really well to maintain 80% production all winter. I feed whole grains, bone meal, kitchen scraps, and old produce from the health food store. I also try to break open the ice in their water every couple of hours during the day.

Year-round milk

Having a year-round goat's milk supply is important to me, although relying on the cheese I make when milk is abundant would be easier. Staggered breeding is the key. I keep records so that I know which does are most likely to breed early, and I get one of them bred as soon as possible. Then I breed one doe each month, saving my longest-producing doe for November breeding. Any doeling that

was kept from the previous spring is bred in December to give her plenty of time to attain good growth. In this way, I am never left with all dry does.

In addition, I usually have one older doe who produces prodigious quantities of milk and stays in good condition without being dried up at all. Nutrition is the key here. It is necessary to feed top quality alfalfa free choice, an adequate amount of goat chow, and a pasture block for any needed supplemental nutrition. Be sure to use a block suitable for goats.



It should contain no urea and is usually sold as a horse block or a "natural" cattle block. I think it does no harm to milk a grown doe all year under these conditions.

Many people breed a prolific milker only every other year. I like to have as many kids as possible for meat, for sale, and for replacement does, so I breed every year. Even so, some heavy milkers do not breed at all. It's the same as with nurse cows. Often the calves have to be removed before the cow will breed.

I've heard people say that they have such a hard time getting their heavy milkers to dry up at the proper time. If you have that "problem," just feed her up and keep milking. One of my does had no kids for three years and still gave a maximum of two gallons dur-

ing the spring and early summers and a minimum of one gallon during the winters. If your doe has kids on her, you need to milk her through the season. Don't wait until she weans them, because by then there will have already been a downturn in the cycle.

Be sure your breeding program is good so that you get the best-producing does you can. With staggered breeding and an occasional doe who milks year round, you'll never be without fresh milk.

Wild harvest

Part of my year-round harvest plan is to be aware of what grows wild where I live. I take advantage of the abundance in season and preserve some for other times. Fish, berries, and various greens can be foraged for dinner a good part of the year. I love to spend a couple of hours catching trout, then searching for edible mushrooms, greens, and wild onions to serve with it. I top this off by harvesting gooseberries to make a pie for dessert. That meal is appealing like no other to me. It is a harvest from the land and is there for the taking.

And speaking of wild things, don't forget herbs for tea and medicines. Yes, you have to learn what is what and what plant has what uses. Start small and learn five plants that are growing near you and are useful. Then build on that. I harvest and dry dozens of plants for medicinal use and have found them to be very effective. We use them especially for prevention, because we're rarely sick. If high blood pressure runs in your family, for example, there are many common herbs that can be made into a tea to drink every day so that maybe it won't happen to you. Besides that, you get the pleasure of picking something good for you and taking advantage of nature's bounty. I drink a tea of dandelion root, yarrow, and violet leaves. My husband drinks one of juniper

berries, prince's pine, and Oregon grape root. These are only a few of the herbs that grow right on my land. Look around and see what grows where you live.

Produce preservation

In planning the produce you will grow, consider first how you will be storing your harvest. Look through your seed catalogs to determine which varieties are better for which methods of preservation. For those of us who are entirely reliant on what we grow for our food, it is imperative to choose wisely. If it isn't tasty or the texture isn't good, it doesn't matter how much you harvested: no one will want to eat it. Here's an example: I canned two kinds of beets. One was absolutely delicious with no dressing-up at all. The other lost its flavor, color, and texture, and no matter how I tried to make them more palatable, they were yucky.

Another quality to look for is extra vitamin content. Some varieties have a naturally higher nutritional content, and your seed catalog will note that in the description. When all your food is home-produced, I think it's worthwhile to take that into consideration. And of course, be meticulous in your method of preservation. Beginners will probably not be totally successful the first time canning, but do pay attention to what you're doing and produce the very best product you can. Winter can seem very long when your harvest is poorly preserved and it's all you have to eat for months at a time.

For those who are just beginning at self-sufficiency, don't spend too much time on fun, exotic things. Grow what will sustain you and will almost certainly be successful. Zucchini, for example, is fun to eat in the summer and is almost always successful, but it doesn't contain a lot of nutrition and is hardly worth preserving. Winter squash, however, is packed with vitamins and will keep relatively easily in a cool place.

In my climate, growing tropical plants is impossible, and while they are certainly more glamorous than root crops, it is more worthwhile for me to cultivate carrots, beets, parsnips, rutabagas, and so on, than to spend time on tomatoes or eggplants. I can always trade for these with people in the valley.

Growing a garden for self-sufficiency is somewhat different than growing a supplemental or recreational garden. Your quantities will be greater, and you will want uniformity and reliability. I use Garden City seeds from Hamilton, Montana, and in the catalog there are "market farming" tips for many vegetables. I find these to be very helpful for my garden.

Be sure to choose varieties that are suitable for your climate. Most seeds off the grocery store rack will not be, unless you live in an ideal climate. Choose varieties that are vigorous and give real food production. In my climate, earliness is vital.

Seed saving allows you to plant seeds that are successful for your micro-climate. If you choose to do that, be sure to buy open-pollinated seed. Growing food is difficult, especially in the north, so make it as easy on yourself as possible. There's nothing wrong with buying seeds, even hybrids, if you can afford to and if it makes producing food easier.

Keep your soil healthy with compost and biological controls. Your soil is your lifeline and must be treated as the living organism that it is. Nurture and

pamper it, and you will be able to grow more bountiful crops than you ever thought possible.

I hope I have given you some ideas for your year-round harvest plans. Harvesting is more than canning or freezing. It is a year-long food design which incorporates every phase of production. Self-sufficiency is hard work, but it is such a thrill to be reliant on ourselves for our family's requirements. It puts us in touch with the earth to such an extent that it is a fulfillment in itself. Δ